

THE ARTISTIC CAPACITY PROJECT RESEARCH AGENDA 2014

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is to outline an agenda for practice-based research projects designed to identify the trends in six critical artistic capacities in the theater field. The prevailing view is that the field's revenue increases have been used over recent decades to expand the number of theaters and for sustainability purposes to such an extent that the remainder available for artistic costs has been constrained. Thus, the prevailing view holds that artistic deficits have been building, and the Artistic Capacity Project seeks to identify data to back up (or disprove) that prevailing view.

To help us identify hypotheses for testing through research, we interviewed six experienced artistic directors with a broad perspective on the field who are quoted throughout this paper: Gregory Boyd (The Alley Theatre), Oskar Eustis (The Public Theater), Robert Falls (The Goodman Theatre), Emily Mann (The McCarter Theatre), James Nicola (New York Theatre Workshop), and Tony Taccone (Berkeley Repertory Theatre). With their advice, we identified hypotheses about six critical artistic capacities to submit to research testing.

1. The capacity to produce or create large scale work has been contracting.
2. The capacity to produce the great plays of the past has been contracting.
3. The capacity to produce or create new plays, devised work, and contemporary performance has been expanding.

4. The capacity to present work to a broad audience that challenges conventions and expectations has been contracting.
5. The capacity to reach a broad audience has been expanding.
6. The capacity to support a profession, in which artists can make a life in the theater, has been contracting.

These hypotheses are *not* conclusions. Conclusions will be reached only through the proposed research projects.

INTRODUCTION

Until the 1960s the professional theater was centered in New York City and organized in the form of commercial ventures. In its heyday, the Broadway system – including touring shows throughout the country – was a successful system for the production and distribution of performances. In other words, it satisfied the needs of both artists and audiences. But in the mid-1920s the Broadway system began to decline, and by the 1950's it was clear that it was no longer serving the needs of either artists or nationwide audiences adequately.

The nonprofit theater movement that began at that time had as its founding principles decentralizing the professional practice of theatre, employing resident companies of actors and other artists, and producing the classic plays that were largely going unseen at the time. As the nonprofit theatre movement matured the new institutions had a substantial artistic and cultural impact but also were required to pay attention to their sustainability. They therefore devoted growing resources to audience development, fundraising, HR policies, facilities, board development, and the formation of financial reserves. By the 1980s a new challenge had emerged. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, "While the economic health and management sophistication of non-profit arts institutions undoubtedly improved in the 70's, there is growing concern with regard to . . . artistic deficits . . ." The NEA committed to "undertake to identify appropriate measures of artistic deficit and collect data from the fields on them. It is of the highest importance that we keep a close watch on these indicators, so that the real costs of American artistic leadership can be known and assisted."¹

In 1985 the Theatre Communications Group's "Taking the Next Step" symposium was held to "explore . . . how best to alleviate what has been called the 'artistic deficit' . . . a term invented . . . to describe the condition that prevails when economic priorities begin to take precedence over aesthetic concerns."² Following the symposium, TCG published Todd London's *The Artistic Home: Discussion with Artistic Directors of America's Institutional Theatres*, which carried the message that many of the nonprofit theaters no longer served as homes for artists. London's book was widely read and influential, but also was seen by some theater leaders as unhelpful criticism rather than a useful observation about the conditions in which theaters operated. In the late 1980's the emergence of the "culture wars"

¹ National Endowment for the Arts. *NEA Long Range Plan 1986-1990*. (Washington: National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities, 1984), 102-103.

² Peter Zeisler, Foreword to *The Artistic Home: Discussions with Artistic Directors of America's Institutional Theatres* by Todd London (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1988), xi

coincided with the retreat of the NEA and national foundations from their generous support of the field; theaters no longer could rely either on the material help or a national perspective it provided about trends in the field. Sustainability therefore became an even stronger imperative. After what had seemed a major push to begin the investigation of artistic deficit, the subject seemed to fade into the background. Suspicions of loss of artistic capacity in the American theatre were not followed by efforts to collect confirming data.

The theoretical basis for the emergence of a field-wide artistic deficit was stated clearly in William Baumol and William Bowen's landmark 1966 study of the economics of the performing arts.³ They showed that the performing arts inevitably would experience a faster rate of increase in costs than the rate of increase in their earned revenues, and they concluded that the only way for the performing arts field to maintain quality of performance would be if it received steadily increasing contributed income. In a follow-up paper, Samuel Schwarz extended the Baumol and Bowen logic to show that if the expenses of professional performing arts organizations do not increase over time faster than earnings by the rate of inflation or more, the differential is the measure by which the quantity or quality of output must be diminished.⁴ In other words, the theory predicts artistic deficits if contributed support does not increase faster than the rate of inflation over time, or if it is diverted to priorities other than the quality and quantity of art.

THE RESEARCH PROJECTS

Over the next several years, we hope that colleagues at Yale and elsewhere will respond to the call and take responsibility for the design and implementation of the research envisioned in this paper. The projects may be undertaken by different people at different times, but we expect to gather all of the results in a single place so that they may be seen as a coherent whole. Eventually, the completed Artistic Capacity Project will consist of six research reports and an evolution of this paper to serve as their umbrella. We expect that it will then be updated at regular intervals to keep an awareness of the current trends in the artistic capacities up to date.

When undertaking the research projects the following conditions should be met:

- Each project should be based on readily available data, in order to avoid the probability that follow-up research will not be undertaken.
- The methodology of each project should be designed so that it is easily repeatable at regular intervals.
- Each project should be designed to focus on trends rather than absolute values.

It would be desirable, though not essential, if the various project results could be combined into an easily understandable artistic capacity "index" that could track trends over time.

³ Baumol, William J. and William G. Bowen, *Performing Arts The Economic Dilemma*. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1981.

⁴ Schwarz, Samuel. "A New Look at the Earnings Gap in the Arts," *Journal of Cultural Economics* (1982): 1-10.

It is important to note explicitly that this research agenda is designed to confirm whether critical artistic capacities actually have been expanding or contracting. It is inevitable that ideas about *why* they have been expanding or contracting will creep into any such discussion, but we take the view that establishing *whether* artistic deficits exist is the first priority and inquiries into causes would be a related but separate inquiry.

HYPOTHESIS #1: THE CAPACITY TO PRODUCE OR CREATE LARGE-SCALE WORK HAS BEEN CONTRACTING.

Many works of the past are large in scale, in terms of cast size, (and also costumes, sets, and sweep of time and place) including Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (45 named characters plus several choruses of additional characters) and William Shakespeare's *Henry V* (42 named characters plus messengers, lords, ladies, attendants, etc.). Large-scale work demands more resources than theaters may be able to afford today, an observation that applies as much to new plays as to plays of the past. Nicola stated, "I think many theaters that are producing new plays are still looking for that five to seven character play set in a living room."

Several of the artistic leaders we interviewed mentioned the frustration they feel when thinking about cast sizes in programming their seasons. Falls stated, "I find every year I have to, in order to do two plays or sometimes three that have in excess of 10-15 characters, which is extraordinary by most standards, I'll end up having to do one of those two- or four-character plays that are New York Broadway or off-Broadway hits." Mann lamented, "Six is considered a big cast for a new play. And that's, I think, diminishing the scope of the work. And that concerns me."

Due to the economic realities of the field currently, hiring casts of more than ten actors, a requirement of many of the great plays of the past, is a substantial expense for a theater. In Houston at The Alley Theatre, Boyd cites the ability to program larger cast plays more frequently because of their commitment to the resident acting company and the economic efficiencies that its existence creates. "David Cromer directed a production of Aaron Sorkin's play *The Farnsworth Invention* here [at the Alley]. And there's twenty-two actors in that. And we were able to do that, because that group of twenty-two actors, who while they're playing *Farnsworth*, they are not in rep with another performance but they are rehearsing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon and performing Sorkin's play in the evening. So it lets us do two big productions," stated Boyd. Because the cast is mostly made up of the company members who are all local residents, it significantly decreases expenses for the theater.

Physical production or the sets, props, costumes, lighting, and sound elements of a theatrical production also contribute to the scale of a theatrical work. It is not uncommon, especially in new plays, that only a unit set is required. With only one location, lighting and sound could be more limited than for a great play of the past like *The Tragedy of Man* by Imre Madách, where Lucifer, Adam, and Eve travel through history. With smaller cast sizes, like those perceived to be common in new plays, come

fewer costumes. “It’s not like there’s a four-character play that has vision and visual brilliance and scope and language that can hold these big houses. That’s worrisome to me. And I think they [playwrights] are writing for, understandably, what the audiences seem to want, how the theaters are producing them. They are writing for the appropriate spaces,” said Mann.

There was a concern among the artistic leaders interviewed that by predominately producing works of smaller scale the field was limiting the scale of plays that playwrights would create. “The playwright’s imagination is unconsciously shaped to write a “producible” play, which creates the unhealthy dynamic in which a writer either fulfills this self-expectation or defies her own instincts. Someone like Wally Shawn manages to write that formulaic “small” play but also manages to explode everyone’s expectations of that kind of play. It would be a much healthier environment if we did not create this dynamic,” said Nicola. Taccone said, “*Execution of Justice* [by Emily Mann] might never have been written [today], not because the will to do it wouldn’t have been there but because of the self-censorship, that insidious ‘no’ that goes off in your head before the project has even started. Where you go, ‘well, there’s no way anyone is going to ever do this.’”

Research Project

1. Track the number of characters in each play produced by the theaters in a representative control group between 1988 and 2012. Counting only the number of characters in each play will exaggerate the number of actors being employed to actually execute the productions but we believe this method, if consistently tracked, will provide a reliable trend line.

HYPOTHESIS #2: THE CAPACITY TO PRODUCE THE GREAT PLAYS OF THE PAST HAS BEEN CONTRACTING.

One of the founding impulses of the regional theatre movement was to provide communities around the country the ability to experience the great plays of the past. Aeschylus’s *The Oresteia* and Bertolt Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* were new plays to the audiences of Houston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, for example. Regional theatres initially chose great plays of the past over new plays, which were at that time the province of Broadway.

But over time the nonprofit theaters began to realize that they had the responsibility to produce new plays as well as the great plays of the past and funders became interested in funding new play development as a top priority. Gradually the priority on new plays replaced the priority on great plays of the past. And today most funders are only interested in new work. “We are becoming more driven by the funding in terms of our programming and new play selection, so fewer audiences are developing a taste for the classical repertoire,” stated Mann.

Nicola says, “Our culture puts a great premium on being the newest, the most recent, the latest fashion, and devalues the idea of enduring or timeless objects, ideas and even people. We are very fickle and subject to the breezes of the moment. We find it difficult to stay the course on anything,

because we are tantalized by the next new thing. This is embedded in us, enshrined in our Constitution, practically, and is the root of our theater's fascination almost exclusively with the "emerging" playwright." Mann adds, "Well as you see now, we're flooded with new plays--well maybe it's just the pendulum has swung. But I'm concerned that it won't swing back, especially with the lack of education in the classics and lack of arts education in schools. It's a cultural shift we are dealing with right now, cultural and economic shift that has collided in a way that has had to make us rethink how we are structured, how we are marketing, how we are programming. It's a new day and we are all trying to find our footing."

Taccone suggested another factor is diminishing attention spans and described a situation where he had lost a multi-character show from his season at the last minute and decided to replace it with a second one-person show. "And to my shock and somewhat revulsion, the audience loved it. They didn't care. They didn't care about two solo shows in the season. That reality really shifted my thinking. That and the 80-minute play that everyone is excited about so they can get home earlier. I just think that's been really rough, especially when you are talking about the great plays of the past, the great plays of the past are long. They're long and people's appetite for long plays has definitely shrunk."

One of the consequences of the diminishing capacity to produce the great plays of the past includes the fact that whole bodies of work may be going unproduced. "I think that when you look at the great plays of the Spanish Golden Age, for instance, you know people are much more reluctant to do those. I'm not sure how much of that is pressure within an organization fiscally or if it's just the artistic director's lack of interest. I wish there were more theaters doing that. I wish my theater could do that," said Falls.

Another issue that arises from the contracted capacity is that actors will be potentially unable to play a diverse array of demanding roles in the future. There was concern from the interviewees that actors would not have the stamina to perform certain types of work. "*Long Days Journey [into Night]* is going to be hard to cast in a few years in America with actors of size and scale in the older parts or in the younger parts. That's a four-hour piece, that's an enormous thing for a young actor playing Edmund to try to do," said Boyd.

In addition to a perceived diminishing capacity to produce the great plays of the past, the diversity of the great plays of the past being produced is equally concerning. According to Boyd, "We are going to be like opera. There are going to be two or three Shakespeares that are always done and thirty-four that are never done." It is a fear that a large portion of the theatrical canon will become extinct.

Research Project

2. Track the number productions of plays written before 1940 in the seasons of a representative control group of theaters between 1988 and 2012. We believe this data is readily available. Tracking the data at multi-year intervals might be satisfactory.

HYPOTHESIS #3: THE CAPACITY TO PRODUCE OR CREATE NEW PLAYS, DEvised WORK, AND CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE HAS BEEN EXPANDING.

Over the past 25 years, it appears that the American theater has seen an explosion of new work, devised work, and contemporary performance. From organizations exclusively dedicated to new work or playwrights like the Lark Play Development Center and Rattlestick Playwrights Theater to 53 colleges and universities offering playwriting MFAs⁵, new work and playwrights are being supported in large numbers. According to Falls, “There is as much exciting playwriting going on as there ever has been in my lifetime in the theater. And particularly works of women and artists of color. It's just a tremendously fertile time for new writing...I think that audiences are sort of hungry for new things that are exciting and challenging and I think that the artistic director's responsibility has to be to nurture and then to get that work on stage.”

With respect to devised work, companies like the Open Theatre and the Living Theatre led the way, joined by companies like Mabou Mines and Wooster Group, and today there is a new crop of ensemble companies, e.g., Elevator Repair Service, The Rude Mechanicals, The Civilians, and SITI Company. In addition to what appears to be an increase in the number of small ensembles,⁶ the number of presenting organizations interested in this work has also increased. Presenters like ArtsEmerson, and St. Ann's Warehouse help sustain many of these new ensemble companies by providing space for their work to be seen. Contemporary performance, which originally grew out of performance art, also is being presented and produced in larger numbers at fringe festivals and smaller presenting venues like On the Boards in Seattle, Performance Space 122 in New York, and a number of contemporary art museums.

While the perception is that the capacity to create new work has been expanding in terms of quantity, the artistic directors we interviewed don't necessarily agree that quality has developed in the same way. Nicola stated, “The kind of new plays that are proliferating, I think in terms of form, are pretty narrow and traditional. The true pioneers, the artists that are really out there pushing into new formal territory, whether they be writers, directors, or a broader idea of theater-maker who defies the older categories, are not thriving.” Mann's perspective was that the work has been getting smaller. “I'm reading the work of really, really good writers and the young guys coming up are terrific. But they are writing very small plays. Very few of them will work in our 1,000-seat house, because they are intimate pieces,” Mann stated.

Several artistic directors suggested that both financial considerations and audience taste are driving the increased creation and production of new work. According to Mann, “There are financial incentives; you are more likely to get a co-production with a new play, you are more likely to get grant support for a new play, you are more likely to get an actor with a name, which helps at the box office.”

⁵ The Playwrights' Center. “Playwriting Programs.” <http://members.pwcenter.org/Default.aspx?pageld=1336667>. (accessed on April 25, 2014).

⁶ The Network of Ensemble Theaters lists more than a hundred members.

Taccone stated, "I feel like because there has been a little bit of fear of the large scale work or inability to do much large scale work, a lot of people have sought new plays of slightly smaller scale. Of course that's complicated by the fact that new work needs more development money, and it takes longer to actually develop an audience for it. But having said that I think there are a lot of great writers out there who are writing for the theater, a lot of new writers, and I think you are seeing more theaters across the country do new work."

Research Project

3. Track the number of new plays, devised works, and contemporary performances created or produced each year by a representative control group of theaters between 1988 and 2012.

HYPOTHESIS #4: THE CAPACITY TO PRESENT WORK TO A BROAD AUDIENCE THAT CHALLENGES CONVENTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS HAS BEEN CONTRACTING.

The artistic leaders we interviewed did not uniformly agree with this hypothesis. "I do think that there's a lot of great stuff that's more hybrid work, devised work. There's a cross pollination of different aesthetic forms, because the world's a lot smaller. I think that people are cherry-picking vocabularies from various different media and I think that's exciting," stated Taccone. But Mann reflected the less positive view, saying "There's a paucity of language and form, but then those who are experimenting with form often are doing experiments of form without content. And then those who are in fact writing things that matter, they are doing it for houses that they think will produce them comfortably." It may be that work that challenges conventions and expectations has not contracted but has shifted to smaller venues.

Artists like Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman pushed the boundaries of the art form in view of general audiences at nonprofit theatres around the country in the 1980s. Works like Adrian Hall's *Belly of the Beast* performed at Trinity Repertory Company, Emily Mann's *Execution of Justice* performed at The Guthrie Theater and Arena Stage, and Joanne Akalaitis's *Endgame* performed at the American Repertory Theater were all examples of work that pushed the art form forward by challenging conventions and expectations in full view of the broad audience provided by leading institutional theaters.

According to Eustis, "The presenters network that groups like Elevator Repair Service or Richard Maxwell's groups or the Woosters depend on seem to me to continue to grow stronger in the last 30 years. They are differentiated from the non-profit theaters. They tend to be associated either with performing arts centers or with art museums. Again, my perspective on this may be subjective, because what I know is I'm certainly participating more in that world than I used to and when I look at a group like Elevator Repair Service there really are ways for them to tour and stay alive although that involves a lot of time in Europe in order to do that." Nicola supported this view by stating, "I think

there's been an explosive growth in something like the Fringe Festival. That seems to be one of the areas that's growing. Partly it's growing because it's adapting to the times. It doesn't require a lot of resources. The prices of tickets are low. It doesn't take a lot of commitment of an audience member's time to figure out how to find it." Boyd stated, "I think if there is a young Richard Foreman out there he's not being invited to do the work [in regional theaters]. Because he either hasn't been identified to the theaters who might be interested in supporting that work, or you can't do it by yourself if you are Richard Foreman. You can't. There was a time when maybe he could do it with \$1,500 somewhere but you can't do that now."

Adding complexity to determining the expansion or contraction of this capacity is the relationship of audience to the theaters of their communities. Expectations are different for different audiences. What is challenging for audiences in Minneapolis is likely to be very different from what is challenging to audiences in Houston. "I have always personally believed that it's essential that a theater challenge conventions and expectations and push the audience to the top of their experience but you want to be ahead of the audience by challenging them most of the time and you should just skirt on the ability to push them over the edge. Every once in a while you are going to push it over the edge, you know, you are just going to push the audience over the edge in your particular community. I think the success of an artistic director in any community should be knowing how to push them [the audience] to the edge but still being part of the community," stated Falls. Since the definition of "challenging" is relative to the audience in different locations, the trend in this capacity will have to be measured by qualitative rather than quantitative research.

Taking risks in season planning was one area that was a frequently called upon talking point when discussing challenging conventions and expectations. Boyd remarked, "I sense when I talk to my colleagues they all have fear of upsetting the audience or offending the audience. I just sense that. I think that drives a lot of play choice and a lot of artist choice." Boyd cites having a resident company as one way to be able to program more challenging work. "I think it's like a baseball team. You know, even when you drop a double header they are still your team. And so the audience identifies with these artists. And the only way you can get away with doing very difficult material, very challenging material, is, I think, that the artists that the community is familiar with take that audience by the hand and lead them into the difficult material. They're already a bridge into that."

"I think all of us are super aware of issues of taste and commercial viability and popularity. I think we are more sensitive to it than we ever have been in the past because I think we are under more pressure to make the box office work. I do think that the non-profit ethos has been greatly influenced and damaged by the last 25 years of what you might call... the triumph of capitalism. It's a much more pay as you go society," stated Taccone. The artistic directors we interviewed said again and again that choosing between doing expansive/challenging work and paying people a reasonable salary is a part of the current reality but is deeply offensive and should not be tolerated.

Our interviews with artistic directors often led to the subject of fear. "Generally I think the American theater is frightened of challenging conventions and expectations because I think there is a fear base that we all live in fear of just surviving, of simply being marginal in our communities, marginal in the culture," stated Falls. Taccone observed, "You sit in the job for a little while and you have to deal with fear. Fear of the marketing department and the development department, and the fear of people

losing their jobs because you know you did three plays in a row that were unpopular. [Because the artistic staffs are so lean] you don't have people to dialogue with to mitigate your fear."

"As you sort of put together this overview of the field you may find a larger fear factor or an environment that's less likely to take on risk. When I look at the season announcements of a lot of the theaters in the field it's all identical. It's like driving across the country you just keep turning on radio stations and every radio station sounds exactly the same, playing the same songs. That seems to be sort of an artistic deficit of imagination of the leadership of the people in those theaters in those communities. I wish that weren't the case, but that seems to be the case," observed Falls.

"We have done so little to consider the role of artistic leadership of theaters--there's been nothing. I think we are reaping the rewards of that. The theater is losing its touch with the culture, to some significant degree, because artistic leadership has failed in the field overall. And I think it's failed because it hasn't been recognized within the field itself as a really critical element to be considered, sustained, examined, supported," stated Nicola.

Have theater leaders failed to provide leadership, or have funders failed to support leadership in the places where it could have cultural effects? This is the kind of causality question that we define as beyond the scope of this research agenda, but it is necessary to observe that many theater leaders feel simultaneously deserted by funders and blamed by them for the consequences.

Research Project

4. In order to ascertain whether or not the capacity to present work to a broad audience that challenges conventions and expectations has been contracting, an opinion survey would need to be created that was distributed to a representative control group of artists and other knowledgeable observers with a historical perspective.

HYPOTHESIS #5: THE CAPACITY TO REACH A BROAD AUDIENCE HAS BEEN EXPANDING.

At the founding of the regional theater movement in the 1960s, it was uncommon to find a city or town outside of New York City that had any professional theater. Not only do almost all cities across the United States now have at least one theater, many cities have a multitude of theaters and presenters of theatrical tours. "I completely agree with that observation. Using Washington DC as a reference point where I essentially spent the 1980s at Arena, the theater community that is there now is almost unrecognizable. There's been an explosion, particularly of building fancy new theaters. I'm not sure that the actual money to operate with all this additional activity has gotten that much bigger," observed Nicola.

In the early decades of the regional theater movement the NEA (reinforced by the state arts agencies) and the Foundation for the Development of the American Professional Theater (FEDAPT) made

systematic efforts to grow the number and diversity of theaters in this country. Today the Theatre Communications Group's website states, "TCG's 504 member theatres span 47 states and the District of Columbia, and reflect the diversity that characterizes American theatre."⁷ Guidestar, a nonprofit that collects, organizes, and presents the tax reports of nonprofits, lists 9,432 theater organizations (including professional and non-professional).⁸ The Alliance of Resident Theatres New York (A.R.T./NY) has over 300 members. The League of Chicago Theatres website says it "is proud to serve a membership of more than 200 theaters, a rich and varied theater community ranging from storefront, non-union theaters with budgets under \$10,000 to major cultural centers with multi-million dollar shows." Theatre Bay Area, a nonprofit service organization dedicated to "unite, strengthen, promote and advance the theatre community in the San Francisco Bay Area"⁹ says that the Bay area is home to over 400 companies.

Boyd comments, "The thing no one can deny that the theaters have acquired over the last twenty years is their audience."

Research Project

5. Track the total number of theaters and their productions by location, and factor in the population of those locations to determine the trend in the total number of people with access to professional theatre, between 1988 and 2012.

HYPOTHESIS #6: THE CAPACITY TO SUPPORT A PROFESSION, IN WHICH ARTISTS CAN MAKE A LIFE IN THE THEATER, HAS BEEN CONTRACTING.

As the field has grown so have full time administrative and production staffs. But the principle of resident companies of artists that was foundational to the nonprofit theater movement has been almost completely replaced by the freelance system in which actors, directors, and designers have little bargaining strength. Under such circumstances, it would be logical to expect that wages, continuity of work, and logical career development would be constrained, and the artistic leaders we interviewed think that's exactly what has happened. "I think the artists are subsidizing the institutions. I think there were some brilliant initial inroads made but I think it's been static for a really long time which means it's gone backwards. We are not paying actors any more money than we were paying them back in the day and that means with inflation, I think they've lost money. And I think that's been really terrible," stated Taccone.

Eustis explains this issue by saying, "It's partially, of course, the disappearance of acting companies, but it also is in a much broader way the fact that the field has come to a kind of silent consensus that artists will not make a living in the American Theater. And that even includes the commercial theater.

⁷ Theater Communications Group. "Membership." http://www.tcg.org/about/membership/member_list.cfm (accessed on May 15, 2014).

⁸Guidestar. "Search Guidestar." <http://www.guidestar.org/SearchResults.aspx>. (accessed on May 15, 2014).

⁹ Theatre Bay Area. "Who We Are." <http://www.theatrebayarea.org/?page=WhoWeAre>. (accessed on May 15, 2014).

And the passive societal consensus that has emerged is that the artists are going to make their living in film and television and commercials and voiceovers and video game work and whatever other digitally reproduced media are coming along and that they will work in the theater as a form of slumming or a form of passion project or sometimes as a form of early career development.”

This “silent consensus” creates a trade-off for theaters in which they must choose between a living wage and the amount or quality of work they are able to produce. Nicola states, “I think about in my own situation here [at New York Theatre Workshop], to compensate actors or the artists more will mean, for sure, there's less resource to do work. There will be less work done, and fewer people will just get more. That's the tradeoff.” The reality of a freelance system is that responsibility to provide a living can be shifted from the theaters to the artists; to the extent that they are able to supplement their theater income in adjacent or even unrelated fields, theaters are able to produce more work.

Income is not the only issue: the freelance system also makes it very difficult for an artist’s career to develop in an orderly way. Developing artists often say there are few positions available in which they can learn from more experienced people, and theater leaders often say they no longer employ any assistants. Taccone states, “It’s really hard to hire a director who has been working in a very small theater, who may do great work, up to the Roda Theatre at Berkeley Rep. It’s not even necessarily about issues related to art; it’s about issues related to managing the project. You’re just managing a lot more people.” To the artistic leaders interviewed a rung is missing in the career ladder for young directors, designers, and actors attempting to move from working in smaller venues to larger ones that pay more of a living wage. This makes it all the more difficult to manage to earn a living wage working solely in the theater. Without this mid-level training ground it becomes more difficult for larger, typically better paying theaters to hire an artist who may not have had the opportunity to gain all the skills needed to work in the larger venue.

The freelance system provides more flexibility for the institutions, and it also has created a distancing in the creative relationship between artists and theaters. Taccone explains, “There just isn't a kind of understanding that a decision may be made not because you don't want the best possible choice for any given show but because the resources that have to be spread out to accommodate a wide variety of issues that are really important. But the freelancer doesn't really know or care about those issues and is constantly having to fight for their own stuff, and it's hard to be a freelancer. You develop a kind of ‘I’ mentality, an individualism that is in some ways in direct opposition to the more collectively driven focus that an institution has to have.”

The danger with artists being unable to earn a living wage in the theater profession is the possibility that theater could return to being an amateur pursuit. Without a professional level of excellence the argument for theater as a vital necessity to understanding and expressing the human condition could be weakened. “What’s at stake here is the theater’s survival as a meaningful part of the culture at large. It’s clear we are being less and less valued, which translates into less and less resources. We have lost touch with the culture,” says Nicola.

Research Project

6. Track how many artists earn an income appropriate to a profession solely doing theater work. It may be more difficult to get data for some artistic disciplines than others.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction, our hope is that colleagues at Yale and elsewhere will decide to take responsibility for designing and implementing research projects in each of the areas we have identified. Even if our hope is fulfilled, it is likely to be several years before all of the projects are completed. That said, if the research is conducted and repeated at regular intervals to monitor trends we would have an invaluable source of reliable data to show whether hypotheses about these six critical artistic capacities are correct, or not:

1. The capacity to produce or create large scale work has been contracting.
2. The capacity to produce the great plays of the past has been contracting.
3. The capacity to produce or create new plays, devised work, and contemporary performance has been expanding.
4. The capacity to present work to a broad audience that challenges conventions and expectations has been contracting.
5. The capacity to reach a broad audience has been expanding.
6. The capacity to support a profession, in which artists can make a life in the theater, has been contracting.

Our interviews with six experienced artistic directors exposed a final observation that provides a fitting ending for this paper. We discerned a remarkable degree of agreement that artistic directors no longer fill the role that they once had in field-wide leadership, compared to the days when policy makers took their lead from the likes of Zelda Fichandler, Gordon Davidson, Lloyd Richards, Bob Brustein, and others.

The perception is that artistic directors seem to have focused on their own organizations largely to the exclusion of involvement in field policy questions. Several of our interviewees took note of the fact that engaged funders on the national level are no longer serving as the conveners of the policy exchanges influenced by artistic directors, as they had in a previous time. But they also regarded this as an abdication of artistic leadership in the field, and even suggested that contraction of any of the critical capacities outlined in this paper might be evidence of failure of leadership.

They suggested that early career training and continuous professional development for artistic directors is crucially needed. Rising artistic directors are expected to make the leap from studio, staff, or freelance work to institutional leadership with little or no preparation for that role. It is a truism that leadership is the prime determinant of organizational success in the arts, and it is remarkable that the field takes such a passive approach to artistic leadership development.

Finally, a number of the artistic directors we interviewed said there is an urgent need for an organization of leading artistic directors to begin advancing an artistic voice in addressing the large-scale problems in the field. Quiet informal conversations about these problems have taken place, but artistic directors know that to expand the field's critical artistic capacities they will need a mechanism to give voice to their collective leadership.